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# The Effects of Relational Coordination and Supervisor Support on Thriving and Job Satisfaction: Evidence from Sales Professionals in U.S. Small Businesses

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**Abstract** - Job satisfaction is often fostered through costly strategic human resource management practices, yet small businesses typically lack the required resources to employ such practices. The current study explores other avenues for promoting job satisfaction, namely thriving, which is a psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of learning and a sense of vitality. By leveraging positive organizational psychology, and examining data collected from B2B salespeople, this study demonstrates the value of relational coordination and supervisor support for enhancing the thriving, and, in turn, job satisfaction of sales professionals among small businesses.

**Keywords** - Thriving, Job satisfaction, Sales management, Relational coordination, Supervisor support, Small businesses

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** - This research highlights the complexity of fostering job satisfaction for sales professionals in small businesses and reveals how job satisfaction can be enhanced through relational resources that support thriving. The study lies at the intersection of sales and small business management practices, and it integrates theory from positive organizational psychology. Thus, it can be of value to practitioners as well as educators of diverse disciplines.

## Introduction

The importance of fostering job satisfaction has long been established across various contexts, and it is becoming increasingly important for small businesses (e.g., Hailey et al., 2019). Locke (1976) defines job satisfaction as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (p. 1300). For more than forty years, scholars have demonstrated the value of job satisfaction for both individual and organizational outcomes. Job satisfaction is a key determinant of turnover intentions (e.g., Tett & Meyer, 1993), and low levels of job satisfaction have been linked to employee burnout and anxiety, among other mental/psychological challenges (e.g., Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2003). Conversely, findings indicate higher job satisfaction is positively related to individual performance (e.g., Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001) and favorable employee attitudes, including organizational commitment (e.g., Shore, & Martin, 1989; Vandenberg & Lance, 1992). At the business level, scholars have demonstrated job satisfaction is critical for a wide range of unit-level outcomes, including employee retention, customer satisfaction—loyalty, employee safety, and firm profitability (e.g., Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

While it is critical to promote job satisfaction, it can be challenging for small businesses who tend to have fewer options to improve job satisfaction and performance, relative to their larger counterparts (Sheehan, 2014). The United States Small Business Administration classifies an organization as a small business if it meets specific numerical size standards, such as a stated number of employees or average annual receipts (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2019). Though these standards vary somewhat across industries, often they include an employee headcount of 500 or less, which has been a commonly accepted definition of small businesses in academic literature (e.g., Nafukho, Graham, & Muyia, 2008). Small businesses face unique challenges, and top among them are often resource constraints. Job satisfaction is frequently fostered through costly strategic human resource practices, such as formal training and development and competitive pay and benefits (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006), yet small businesses commonly lack sophisticated human resource (HR) practices and rarely have HR expertise (Wapshott & Mallett, 2015). Instead, it is more common for small businesses to function based on informal rules, unwritten customs, implicit understandings, and regular employer—employee interactions that govern the work and relationships (e.g., Greenidge, Alleyne, Parris, & Grant, 2012; Lai, Saridakis, & Johnstone, 2017).

Because many small businesses lack the resources to promote job satisfaction through strategic human resource practices, it is important to understand other mechanisms that influence job satisfaction among employees of small businesses. The field of positive organizational psychology, which focuses on positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), can provide insight toward this end. As such, in the current study, I propose thriving as a process through which positive relational characteristics (i.e., relational coordination and supervisor support) affect job satisfaction among employees in small businesses, namely sales professionals, for whom their job satisfaction can yield substantial impacts on customers and firm profitability (e.g., Evanschitzky, Sharma, & Prykop, 2012). Thriving is a psychological state of joint learning and vitality (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005); thus, when individuals thrive, they sense they are developing, and they feel alive and energized. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of supervisor support in the sales context (e.g., Matthews, Zablah, Hair, & Marshall, 2016), as well as for job satisfaction specifically (e.g., Babin & Boles, 1996). In this study, I extend such research by proposing thriving as an intervening mechanism through which that effect is attained. Likewise, I propose relational coordination, which is a mutually reinforcing process of interaction between communication and relationships carried out for the purpose of task integration (Gittell, 2002, p. 301), as an important determinant of thriving and, in turn, job satisfaction.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, I review the theoretical foundation of the research model, which draws from the socially embedded model of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), and I develop hypotheses in support of the model. Next, I introduce the methodology and data, collected from a sample of sales professionals among small businesses in the United States. After discussing the results of the analyses, I conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for research and practice, as well as a summary of the contributions of this research.

# **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

## **Thriving at Work**

Spreitzer and colleagues (2005) proposed a model of thriving at work, which specifies how individuals experience the psychological state of joint learning and vitality. They posit that contextual features of the work environment (e.g., decision-making discretion, climate respect) and resources produced through one's work (e.g., knowledge, positive meaning, relational resources) enable individuals to engage in agentic work behaviors (e.g., task focus, heedful relating/operating with attentiveness to others), which facilitates thriving at work. In turn, thriving garners positive health, attitudinal, and performance outcomes. Spreitzer et al.'s (2005) work, along with subsequent research (e.g., Kleine et al., 2019), suggests perceptions of interpersonal dynamics at work are critical for thriving. Thus, the current study leverages the socially embedded model of thriving, with a particular focus on relational characteristics at work, and applies it to the context of sales professionals in small businesses.

The central premise of this study is that thriving is an important determinant of job satisfaction in small businesses, and it serves as a linchpin between the relational characteristics of one's work and his or her job satisfaction. As such, sales professionals in small businesses are likely to be satisfied with their jobs when they experience a sense of thriving. More specifically, the joint experience of enhanced knowledge and understanding (i.e., learning), as well as feelings of aliveness (i.e., vitality), will lead to more favorable assessments of one's job. Simultaneously fostering learning and vitality is important because it is possible for individuals to experience vitality (e.g., engagement) but not sense that they are learning and developing (Spreitzer et al., 2010).

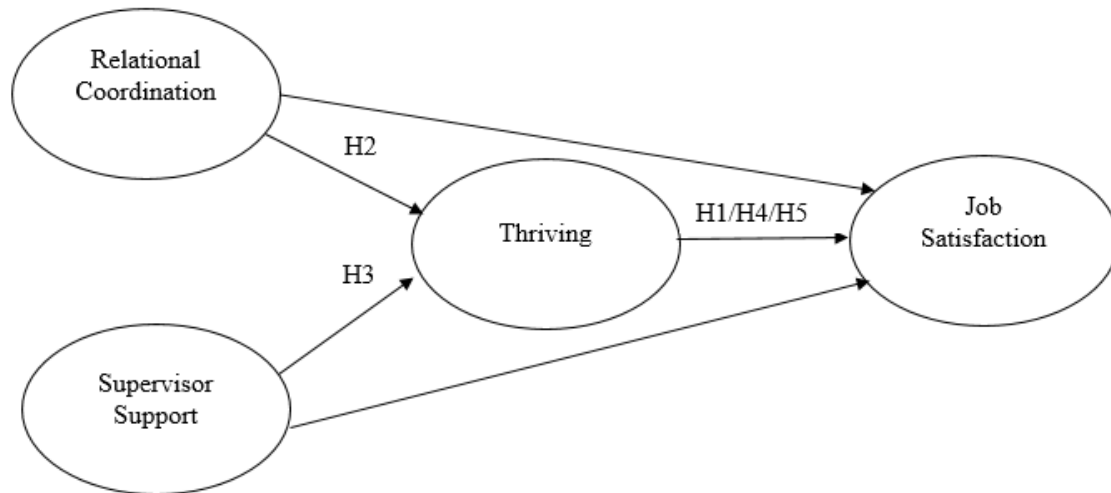
The relational characteristics outlined in the current research model, namely relational coordination and supervisor support, are proposed to contribute to the joint state of learning and vitality. To this point, the relational resources that are attained through a supportive supervisor and relational coordination in the workplace, which manifests through shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009), may enable sales professionals to connect with and learn from others, thereby supporting the extent to which they learn, develop, and remain energized at work. In the following sections, I elaborate on these ideas by developing hypotheses in support of the model depicted in Figure 1, and I begin by proposing thriving as a key antecedent of job satisfaction in small businesses.

## **Thriving and Job Satisfaction**

Consistent with theory (Spreitzer et al., 2005) and empirical studies in other contexts (Kleine et al., 2019), thriving is expected to lead to higher levels of job satisfaction among sales professionals in small businesses. Thriving serves as an adaptive function and can thus help individuals adapt to the demands of their work (Mushtaq, Abid, Sarwar, & Ahmed, 2017; Porath, Spreitzer, & Gibson, 2008). This may be particularly important in the context of a small businesses, where individuals are expected to do more with less (Gallego, Rubalcaba, & Hipp, 2012). Rather than giving way to the inherent challenges among small businesses, thriving may help individuals develop creative solutions (Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2016) for overcoming resource constraints

that may otherwise hinder job satisfaction (Rondeau, Francescutti, & Zanardelli, 2005). Thus, thriving may help offset demands, and, in doing so, may prevent burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

**Figure 1. Research Model**



Research suggests individuals who experience a sense of thriving are more prone to experience greater mental and physical health (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007), and, with such health, they may be more likely to make positive assessments of their experiences. To this point, recall that job satisfaction is a positive emotional state (Locke, 1976). Relatedly, scholars have established a connection between well-being and job satisfaction (Judge & Klinger, 2008), and the markers of thriving (i.e., learning and vitality) can contribute to greater well-being (e.g., Ryan & Fredrick, 1997; Watson, Tregaskis, Gedikli, Vaughn, & Semkina, 2018).

Further, although extant literature lacks insight on the effect of thriving on job satisfaction in small businesses, research by Rowden and Ahmed (2000) demonstrates informal learning that occurs in the context of small businesses can enhance job satisfaction. As learning is an essential component of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005), Rowden and Ahmed's (2000) research, as well as other studies, which indicate higher levels of workplace learning lead to greater job satisfaction (e.g., Cerasoli et al., 2018; Rose, Kumar, & Park, 2009), support the notion that as sales professionals in small businesses thrive, job satisfaction will increase.

Similarly, related bodies of literature suggest the affective dimension of thriving (i.e., vitality) can likewise contribute to job satisfaction. Although thriving and engagement are distinct, there is conceptual overlap between vitality and the vigor dimension of engagement (Spreitzer et al., 2010). To this point, prior research has demonstrated the value of engagement for promoting positive attitudinal outcomes among salespeople, as well as for mitigating negative predictors of job satisfaction (e.g., turnover intentions) (e.g., Matthews et al., 2016; Soane et al., 2012). Accordingly,

*Hypothesis 1: Thriving positively relates to job satisfaction.*

## **Relational Coordination, Supervisor Support, and Thriving**

Relational coordination and supervisor support can be viewed as relational resources that promote connectivity and opportunities for learning. Thus, these resources are expected to contribute to thriving in small businesses, and, in turn, job satisfaction. Support for these assertions can be drawn from extant literature.

Relational coordination manifests through high-quality relationships that are comprised of shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Gittell, 2006). Shared goals, a common vision, can help ensure energy is not wasted trying to meet ambiguous expectations and thus support a sense of vitality. Previous research suggests relational coordination can enhance resiliency and one's ability to cope with stress (Dutton, 2003; Gittell, 2008; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), which are likewise important for remaining energized at work. The shared goals and shared knowledge inherent in relational coordination can ensure individuals have access to the informal rules and implicit understandings that often govern operations in small businesses (Greenidge et al., 2012). While, mutual respect can reinforce the close interactions that are characteristic in small businesses (Lai et al., 2017), encourage individuals to value the contributions of others (Rogers & Ashforth, 2014), and help organizational members withstand conflict and exchange opinions and ideas (Brueller & Carmeli, 2011). In these ways, relational coordination can enable heedful relating, thereby promoting vitality and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Further, previous research has shown that quality relationships, through which relational coordination manifests, are positively related to psychological safety, learning behaviors, and learning from failure (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). With enhanced coordination and connectivity among organizational members, it becomes more likely for individuals to explore new opportunities and engage in other agentic behaviors that support thriving (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Losada & Heaphy, 1999; Spreitzer et al., 2005). This is consistent with research on informal work-related learning, as Doornbos, Simons, and Denessen (2008) indicate close interactions and an awareness of others support spontaneous and deliberate learning. As individuals are exposed to such experiences, thriving should increase. Stated formally,

*Hypothesis 2: Relational coordination positively relates to thriving.*

Just as relational coordination is expected to positively relate to thriving, so too is supervisor support. Supportive supervisors engage in behaviors that help satisfy employees' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Parfyonova et al., 2019), which are psychological antecedents for human growth and key contributors to thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Through their support, supervisors can set the stage for thriving among sales professionals in small businesses.

Supportive supervisors engage in numerous behaviors that can enhance thriving. To this point, such supervisors provide employees with choice in how they go about their work, and they encourage employees to handle work-related problems (Parfyonova et al., 2019; Rooney & Gottlieb, 2007). In doing so, they can facilitate engagement and opportunities for task exploration and development. Similarly, supportive supervisors help employees see how their work connects

to organizational goals, provide guidelines that direct work and help detect progress toward goals, and explain the value of their work, which can foster engagement and heedful relating. They also provide feedback and demonstrate care and concern for their employees, which can contribute to learning and needs for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Parfyonova et al., 2019).

In these ways, supportive supervisors can help employees acquire knowledge resources, such as a more nuanced understanding of work, positive affective resources that support engagement, and relational resources that support experimentation and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005). As such, it is likely that as supervisor support increases, thriving will likewise increase. Hence,

*Hypothesis 3:* Supervisor support positively relates to thriving.

Based on the aforementioned arguments and by linking Hypothesis 1 with Hypotheses 2 and 3, respectively, I propose the following additional hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 4:* Relational coordination has a positive indirect effect on job satisfaction via thriving.

*Hypothesis 5:* Supervisor support has a positive indirect effect on job satisfaction via thriving.

## **Methodology**

### **Procedure and Sample**

To test the hypothesized relationships, survey data was collected from business-to-business sales professionals in U.S. small businesses, who were recruited using a Qualtrics Research Panel. In an effort to maximize the generalizability of the findings, multiple industries were represented in the sample (see Table 1). The sample was 54.7% female, with an average age of 43.53 (SD = 13.04). Participants had an average organizational tenure of 7.32 years (SD = 5.71). The majority of respondents (62.8%) had a bachelors or graduate degree, and most respondents (86.1%) were in supervisor or management level positions. Participants reported their firms' annual sales, and 29.20% reported less than \$5 million, 22.60% reported \$5 to \$10 million, 29.20% reported \$10 to \$50 million, and 16.80% reported more than \$50 million in annual sales.

**Table 1. Industries Represented in Sample**

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
Accommodation or food services	1.5
Arts, entertainment, or recreation	1.5
Education	1.5
Health Care	2.2
Information (e.g., software publishers)	3.6
Management of companies or enterprises	8.8
Manufacturing	8.8
Professional, scientific, or technical services	21.9
Retail	11.7
Transportation/Logistics	2.2
Utilities	0.7
Warehousing	0.7
Wholesale/Distribution	12.4
Other	22.6

n = 137

## **Measures**

The survey was comprised of multi-item scales that were adopted from extant literature. While self-report measures are appropriate given the perceptual nature of this study, the use of single-source data presents concerns about the possibility of common method bias (CMB). To help mitigate threats associated with CMB, a priori procedural steps were employed. To this point, various scale formats and anchors were used, and the predictors were proximally separated from the criterion variables using measures of other constructs unrelated to this study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). Moreover, research (Krosnick, 1999) suggests that when respondents have higher levels of education, as was the case for the majority of respondents in this study, it is less likely they will respond in a non-differentiated manner. Lastly, common method bias testing was conducted using a full collinearity approach (Kock, 2015, 2017). Based on the results, no common method bias problem occurred, as the VIF values at the factor level model estimation were less than the recommended threshold of 3.3 (Kock, 2015).

Relational coordination was measured with 10 items (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009), measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Sample items include, “In this organization, we act toward common goals” (shared goals), “Employees in this organization know what tasks their co-workers deal with” (shared knowledge), and “When someone expresses his/her opinion, we respect it” (mutual respect).

Supervisor support was measured with five items adopted from Anaza & Rutherford (2012). Sample items include, “My immediate supervisor cares about my well-being” and “My immediate supervisor is willing to help me if I need help.” Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each statement, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) ( $\alpha = .95$ ).



Porath et al.'s (2012) 10-item Thriving at Work scale was used to assess thriving. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strong disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), participants responded to statements such as, "At work, I find myself learning often" and "At work, I am looking forward to each new day." The scale demonstrated adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

Job satisfaction was measured with seven items adopted from prior studies (Brashear, Bellenger, & Brooks, 2003; Brown & Peterson, 1993; Netmeyer, Maxham, & Lichtenstein, 2010). The items ( $\alpha = .93$ ) included statements such as, "Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my present job" and "My job is very worthwhile." Participants indicated their agreement using a scale ranging from 1 (strong disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

## Analytic Approach

The hypothesized relationships were tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), which was performed using SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). PLS-SEM is a suitable choice when working with small samples (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019; Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017), and this analytic approach determines statistical significance using bootstrapping ( $n = 5,000$  samples). All significance values reported are based on two-tailed tests, and a two-stage process was used to examine the measurement model, and, subsequently, the structural model (Holland, 1999).

## Results

### Measurement Model Results

The reliability and validity of the constructs were examined, using a reflective measurement model approach recommended by Hair et al. (2017). The interconstruct correlations are reported in Table 2. First, the outer loadings were assessed to ensure each item met the recommended threshold of .70. One thriving item and one relational coordination item failed to meet the cutoff and were thus removed from the measurement model. All remaining items were satisfactory, with loadings ranging from .73 to .94. Next, internal consistency reliability was examined, and both composite reliabilities and Cronbach alpha scores were acceptable (Hair et al., 2017).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics & Interconstruct Correlations**

	Mean	SD	AVE	L-HTMT	1	2	3	4
1. Rel. Coordination	5.47	1.03	66%	.83	.95			
2. Supervisor Support	5.52	1.31	83%	.84	.72**	.96		
3. Thriving	5.44	1.07	68%	.85	.78**	.71**	.95	
4. Job Satisfaction	5.55	1.21	73%	.84	.76**	.79**	.80**	.95

Note: SD = standard deviation; AVE = average variance extracted; L-HTMT = largest heterotrait-monotrait ratio. Composite reliabilities are shown on the diagonal and entries below the diagonal are construct correlations.

The measurement model analysis also included an assessment of convergent and discriminant validity. The average variance extracted (AVE) for the constructs surpassed the recommended threshold of 50% or higher (Hair et al., 2017), with AVEs ranging from .66 to .83.

Discriminant validity was assessed using Fornell-Larker criterion (Fornell & Larker, 1981) and the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio test (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). The AVE for each construct exceeded its shared variance with other constructs and thus met the Fornell-Larker criterion. The HTMT ratio examines the average of the correlations of indicators across different constructs to the average of correlations of indicators within the same construct. Ratios below .90 indicate discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015), and, as reported in Table 2, the largest HTMT ratio is .85. Consequently, the HTMT ratio tests provide further support for the discriminant validity of the constructs in the research model.

### Structural Model Results

The structural model results are reported in Table 3, and, as shown, the results support the hypotheses proposed in this study. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, thriving is positively related to job satisfaction ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ). Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted a positive relationship between relational coordination and thriving, and a positive relationship between supervisor support and thriving, both of which are supported. More specifically, relational coordination positively predicts thriving ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ), and supervisor support, likewise, positively predicts thriving ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ).

**Table 3: Summary of Hypotheses and Bootstrapping Results**

	Path Relationship	Direct			Indirect indirect/total for path values			Results
		Path	T Statistic	P Value	Path	T Statistic	P Value	
H1	Thriving → Job Satisfaction	.55	4.55	<.001				Supported
H2	Relational Coordination → Thriving	.67	10.18	<.001				Supported
H3	Supervisor Support → Thriving	.08	.67	.50				Supported
H4	Relational Coordination → Thriving → Job Satisfaction	.03	.38	.71	.20/.40	2.70	.01	Supported: Partial, 50% of total effect on job satisfaction is explained by thriving
H5	Supervisor Support → Thriving → Job Satisfaction	.55	5.64	<.001	.11/.51	2.42	.02	Supported: Partial, 21.57% of total effect on job satisfaction is explained by thriving

Hypotheses 4 and 5 predicted indirect effects of relational coordination and supervisor support on job satisfaction. Specifically, hypothesis 4 predicted a positive and indirect effect of relational coordination on job satisfaction through thriving, which is supported by the results ( $\beta = .20, p = .01$ ). As shown in Table 4, when examining the variance accounted for (VAF), 50% of

the effect of relational coordination on satisfaction is explained by thriving. Hypothesis 5 predicted a positive and indirect effect of supervisor support on job satisfaction through thriving, and the results support this hypothesis ( $\beta = .11, p = .02$ ). The VAF results indicate that 21.57% of the effect of supervisor support on satisfaction is explained by thriving.

To assess the predictive power of the effects revealed through our analyses, we used the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) for in-sample prediction (Sarstedt, Ringle, Henseler, & Hair, 2014) and  $Q^2$  (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974) for out-of-sample prediction. The  $R^2$  values are 65.8% for thriving and 75.4% for job satisfaction. These values suggest the model demonstrates moderate to substantial predictive relevance (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). The  $Q^2$  values, calculated via blindfolding, further support the model's predictive relevance. Specifically, all  $Q^2$  values are larger than zero, which suggests the explanatory constructs used to predict the endogenous constructs demonstrate predictive relevance. These values, along with the  $R^2$  values, indicate the model does an adequate job of explaining variance in the endogenous constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2014).

## **Discussion and Managerial Implications**

In interpreting the results of this study, it is important to be mindful of the study limitations. First, all data was collected at a single point in time, and all measures were self-report given the perceptual nature of this study. Future studies could benefit from robust remedies for common method variance (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), as well as examining the hypothesized relationships using data collected from a larger sample. Nevertheless, this research offers valuable insights.

This study contributes to small business and sales literature by leveraging positive organizational scholarship, and more specifically, the socially embedded model of thriving at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005), to explore ways to promote job satisfaction among sales professionals in small businesses. Toward this end, antecedents of thriving were examined, as well as the mediating role of thriving between two relational resources, namely supervisor support and relational coordination, and job satisfaction. The results of this study reveal ways in which small businesses can foster job satisfaction among sales professionals despite the financial resource constraints that are characteristic of such organizations (Greenidge et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2017).

Results indicate thriving is a significant predictor of job satisfaction for sales professionals in small businesses. When sales professionals sense that they are learning at work, and feel alive and vital, they are more likely to be satisfied with their work. In large organizations, learning often transpires through formal and resource-intensive training efforts and strides toward fostering vitality may span multiple areas of the business (e.g., HR). However, the results of this study shed light on how small businesses can leverage relational resources to promote thriving.

As noted, relational coordination and supervisor support are positively related to thriving and partially mediate the relationship between these constructs and job satisfaction. Thus, marketing and sales managers within small businesses should attend to the relational dynamics within the workplace and strive to provide a supportive climate. Like Bryan and White (2019), who suggest small firms benefit from intrinsically motivating situations, particularly in the absence of formal HR practices, the current study reveals the value of promoting opportunities for learning

and vitality. The positive impact of relational coordination and supervisor support on thriving has important implications for small business management. It suggests that establishing shared goals, facilitating shared knowledge, and promoting mutual respect is critically vital for salesperson thriving, and, in turn, job satisfaction. Likewise, consistent with other small business (e.g., Moon & Na, 2009; Nafukho et al., 2008) and sales research (e.g., Matthews et al., 2016), this study underscores the importance of demonstrating care and concern, providing opportunities learning and exploration, and offering help and support to B2B sales professionals, particularly those in small businesses.

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